

'Generation Plagiarism'?

Copying and pasting from the Web is just like copying from a book. But too many students either don't know that it's cheating—or don't care.

By *Trip Gabriel*

A freshman at Rhode Island College copied and pasted from a website about homelessness—and didn't think he needed to credit a source in his assignment because the site didn't list an author.

At DePaul University in Chicago, the tip-off to one student's copying was the purple shade of several paragraphs he had lifted from the Web: When confronted by a writing tutor, he was not defensive—he just wanted to know how to change the purple text to black.

And at the University of Maryland, a student said he thought Wikipedia's entries on the Great Depression—unsigned and collectively written—did not need to be credited since they counted, essentially, as "common knowledge."



The problem with those examples, and countless others at high schools and colleges across the country, is that using someone else's words without attribution—even when it's as easy as clicking "copy and paste"—is plagiarism. But many students, so used to the free flow of information online, simply don't grasp that it's a serious misdeed—one that can lead to suspension, expulsion, and a permanent blemish on their academic record.

"In a sense, they don't see what the big deal is," says Donald L. McCabe, a business professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "The information is available," he says, so their feeling is "why should I have to recreate it when I can just get it?"

In surveys conducted by McCabe that tracked thousands of college students, 40 percent admitted to plagiarizing a few sentences in written assignments, and 61 percent admitted to cheating on assignments and exams. In a separate survey, 47 percent of high school students admitted to copying and pasting from the Web, with nearly one third saying they didn't consider it cheating.

Alarmed at the rise of digital cheating, many educators, have responded by using sophisticated anti-plagiarism services that, for example, have students submit their work online to be checked against a database of millions of other term papers.

Free for the Taking?

Digital technology makes cheating easier—whether it's texting exam answers to friends, sharing homework online, or downloading ready-made term papers from the Internet. But it may also be redefining how students, who are used to music file-sharing and Wikipedia, understand the concepts of authorship and plagiarism.

Bryson Cwick, an 18-year-old senior at Ripon High School in Ripon, California, says such confusion is common among his classmates. "I think they view the Internet almost like a second opinion" that doesn't need to be attributed, he says.

Teresa Fishman, the director of the Center for Academic Integrity at Clemson University in South Carolina, has reached the same conclusion. "We have a whole generation of students who've grown up with information that just seems to be hanging out there in cyberspace and doesn't seem to have an author," she says. "It's possible to believe this information is just out there for anyone to take."

Sarah Brookover, a senior at Rutgers, has observed many of her classmates liberally copying and pasting without attribution. She works at the campus library and has pondered the differences between researching in the stacks versus online.

When you research on the Internet, she says, "you're not walking into a library, you're not physically holding the article," so it's easier to forget that the ideas don't belong to you. But online, she says, "everything can belong to you really easily."

'No Such Thing As Originality'?

The notion that it's OK to borrow from all this information to mash up a new creative work was tested earlier this year by Helene Hegemann. The German teenager's best-selling novel about Berlin club life turned out to include passages lifted from other authors.

Instead of apologizing, Hegemann insisted, "There's no such thing as originality anyway."

That theory doesn't wash with Sarah Wilensky, a senior at Indiana University, who took aim at Hegemann in a column in her student paper headlined "Generation Plagiarism." She says relaxing plagiarism standards "does not foster creativity, it fosters laziness."

Donald J. Dudley, who oversees the discipline office at the University of California, Davis, would agree. Of the 196 plagiarism cases referred to his office last year, most involved students who intentionally copied—knowing it was wrong.

To address the problem, some colleges are requiring students to complete online tutorials about plagiarism, which at one school cut down plagiarism rates by two thirds. And a majority of U.S. colleges now subscribe to anti-plagiarism services like Turnitin.com, which can instantly search a database of billions of online sources to ferret out plagiarism and cheating.

Andrew Siewert, an English teacher at Chaminade College Preparatory School in St. Louis, Missouri, says the service is useful but won't solve the problem by itself.

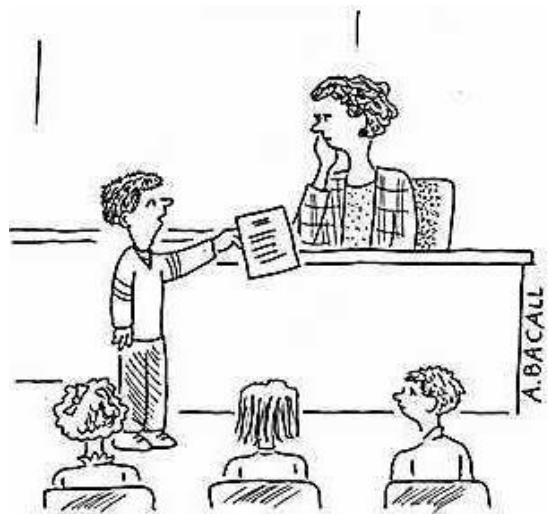
"I think the [real] answer is going to be continuous teaching," he says. "We just have to keep talking about plagiarism every year till students get it."

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McHUMOR.com by T. McCracken



"What I called creative recycling,
the school called plagiarism."



"I didn't write the report. I printed it directly from the Internet,
but I did all of the stapling and collating myself."